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# A New York artist's response to 9/11: Ahron Weiner's "Cycles of Violence"

Géraldine Fasentieux

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Ahron Weiner and the first "decollage" of the series : *Projection*. Courtesy of the artist.

- 1 The series entitled "Cycles of Violence" is a ten-piece visual narrative of advertising manipulations or more exactly "decollages," that New York-based artist Ahron Weiner created and photographed in the streets of New York City. These images are meant to

explore the causes, events, implications and ongoing tragedy of 9/11, thus portraying the ultimate violence of which today's world is capable.

- 2 The decollage process is an evolution of AdInfinitum©, a photographic series of decaying outdoor advertisements Ahron Weiner began shooting during the three years he spent in Prague from 2001 to 2004. With AdInfinitum©, as its name indicates, the artist challenges the timeliness and obsolescence of advertising, and its very purpose, by creating a new and artistic afterlife for the images and words contained in them.
- 3 What is particularly striking is that Ahron Weiner's images are achieved by breaking down rather than putting together, however the juxtapositions are by no means arbitrary. Even though each image speaks vividly on its own, together they form a narrative that tells the story of 9/11.
- 4 The cycle was originally shown on an outdoor scaffold installation on Adams Street, Brooklyn, at the Dumbo Arts Festival on September 2010. Each image, printed as a 3.5' x 2' poster, repeated six times across the scaffolding, ending with the first image. The notion of cyclicity inherent in the work thus punctuates the never-ending nature of history.



The ten images that compose "Cycles of Violence": Projection / Impact / Chaos / Carnage / Collapse / The Death of Liberty / Aftermath / Invasion / Insurgency / Sacrifice. Courtesy of the artist.



Ahron Weiner, N° 2, *Impact*.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Ahron Weiner, N° 5, *Carnage*.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Ahron Weiner, N° 7, *Aftermath*.  
Courtesy of the artist.





Ahron Weiner, N° 10, *Sacrifice*.

Courtesy of the artist.

GF: You are a born and bred New Yorker, but you weren't in New York City on 9/11. How did you learn about the events and how did you feel?

AW: I was living and working in Prague at the time. My wife was still living in NY—she was pregnant with our second child, and working in Midtown NYC. I received a phone call from her as I was on my way back to the office from a client meeting—she said “we’re under attack” and went on to explain that two planes had just hit the Twin Towers. I arrived back at my office in time to watch the first building collapse. Everything about it was beyond comprehension. Watching it unfold on television was surreal. Being away from my wife, son, family, friends, unsure what was happening (it was several hours before I was able to get in touch with anyone) was terrible.

GF: How was 9/11 perceived overseas?

AW: Based on my experiences in Prague, there seemed to be a tremendous amount of outrage over the attack on civilians, an outpouring of sympathy, and strong support for the US. As our country “responded” with renewed military efforts in the Middle East, I watched that support erode rather quickly.

GF: How did you start working on the Cycles of Violence project?

AW: I didn’t set out to create a series on 9/11. I’d decollaged and shot each of these images over a two-month period—and viewed each of them as an individual image—I didn’t see them as a narrative. The 2010 Dumbo Arts Festival accepted my proposal for a 140’ long AdInfinitum© installation on an outdoor scaffold. The festival was in late September. I was trying to figure out a narrative idea for the installation, and with September approaching, 9/11 was on my mind. It all clicked together one night.

GF: Do your history and advertising backgrounds influence your technique?

AW: Yes. The fact that I've been working in advertising my entire career (I currently run a NY-based ad agency named Our Man In Havana), certainly influences this all. My early AdInfinitem© work in Prague was born out of my interest in what happened to advertising once its commercial purpose has expired.

GF: How do you feel when you "dig" through layers of paper into the city walls?

AW: I find the process of tearing through layers of old advertising posters cathartic, and I enjoy creating visual art out of something that is ubiquitous and largely ignored.

GF: Is it more exciting to work in the streets than in a studio?

AW: It's certainly more amusing. I've had a number of encounters with the police. Most of the time, they want to make sure I'm going to clean up after myself. Once, I was cited for 'criminal mischief' and 'endangering the welfare of a minor' (my 12-year-old son, who was helping me work one evening). That last one wasn't amusing. I get wonderful comments from passers-by. Many think I was hired by a construction company to clean these scaffolds—my favorite comment was "man, you've got a SHIT job." Priceless.

GF: You take risks when you tear away pieces for you could mess up your work. Why don't you ever want to put a piece back or add some meaningful piece?

AW: I don't see it as risk-taking—destruction is the cornerstone of my creative process. I don't start with any pre-conceived notion or goal in mind—I just tear through the layers of street advertising posters in front of me. I call the process Semiotic Archaeology—digging through layers of words and images to create new juxtapositions and meanings.

Alexander McQueen said "I spent a long time learning how to construct clothes, which is important to do before you can deconstruct them." Having worked in advertising for the past 18 years, I'm very familiar with my medium.

Adding pieces back or combining images from different places would be cheating.

GF: Is it the discovery process that fascinates you? Do you feel like an explorer or an ethnologist?

AW: It's a process of exploration and discovery, but at a deeper level, it's a wonderful ethnological study. Marshall McLuhan famously said "the medium is the message." With the average city dweller being exposed to over 3,000 advertising messages a day, I think the *message* is the medium we live in.

GF: Walter Benjamin said of French artist Jacques Villeglé that he was a « *releveur de traces de civilisation* ». Do you feel like that?

AW: Absolutely. Working in this medium has led me to work with found objects—rusted metal, wire, old newspapers, sea shells, coffee filters. We live in a disposable era, which is an unfortunate thing. When I look around, I see potential in everything.



View of the installation. Courtesy of the artist.

GF: The fact that your work was presented on a scaffold made it hard to see and many passers-by must have missed it. Did you choose that place on purpose? Did you want to challenge the viewers?

AW: Yes. My original "Cycles of Violence" installation ran on 140 feet of scaffolding, 30 feet up from the street. My goal was to blur the line between advertising and art—by installing my art (which is made out of advertising) in the same way that street advertising hangs in urban settings. It was quite effective—most people walked by without noticing—which I took as a sign of success. Every once in a while, people would stop, look, and realize they'd "discovered" an art installation that was "hidden" right out in the open. It was great to see that as well. It's been a year since the installation came down, and I'm still meeting people who remember the piece.

It is estimated that the "average" US consumer is exposed to over 3,000 advertising messages a day. From an early age, we've trained ourselves to filter out most of this "noise," to the point that the masses are largely unaware of the role advertising plays in our culture at large, in their lives, purchase decisions, sense of self-worth, etc...

There's a wonderful passage in D.F. Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. An "old timer" at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting gets up and shares the following parable with a room full of newbies:

*"This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?' and swim away."*

This parable captures my sentiments regarding advertising. I see advertising as the fabric of our culture—omnipresent, and largely invisible.

One of the goals of my AdInfinitum© series is to call attention to advertising, and invite people to consider it anew—both as art, and its broader role in our lives.

GF: Not long ago, world-famous violinist Joshua Bell played as a street musician on a Stradivarius and people actually ignored him. So it seems that people are not only blind but also deaf. Do you think people are jaded?

AW: Jaded. Blind. Deaf. Dead. To me, Bell's performance symbolizes that art is all around us, at all times. The onus is on the individual to take the time to look, to listen, to consider, interpret anew. One of the goals of AdInfinitem© is to call attention to this—ask people to take another look at advertising—as something familiar and largely ignored at a conscious level—in an entirely new context.

GF: Half of the images that compose the "Cycles of Violence" depict the aftermath of the event. Do you think the mental states of the aftermath are particularly relevant?

AW: They're every bit as relevant as the events of 9/11 itself. None of this happened in a vacuum. Planes were hijacked and crashed into buildings by people with an agenda. Beyond the loss of life and material damage—which were devastating—they changed the way we think, the way we live. Ten years later, the US is still at war overseas—ostensibly to prevent this from happening again. These attacks seeded fear and doubt in the minds of the public. Security levels continue to climb. Since the attacks, we're not allowed to take anything with a sharp edge (including nail clippers) on planes. After that asshole tried to light his shoe on fire, we have to take our shoes off as part of security screening. The attempted Gatorade bombers in London ensured we can't take more than 3 ounces of liquid in our carry-on luggage. That douchebag who smuggled a bomb in his underwear ensured that we're practically strip searched before each flight. I think security is important, but I believe these acts are largely symbolic. It's just forcing terrorists to get more creative.

GF: Do you think that some historical events cannot be represented?

AW: I think anything can be represented—and has. With that said, I think conveying the emotional weight or quality of certain events is impossible. Images of events are representations—a step removed from the original.

My grandmother was one of the 3,000 who survived the Auschwitz death march, and I grew up listening to her stories of life before the war and life in the camps. From her stories, and my experiences at home and in school, I grew up with what I believed to be a well-developed understanding of the tragedy of the Holocaust.

When I moved to Prague and started traveling around Eastern Europe to document former Jewish sites in various states of decay, I realized that for all my knowledge—facts, figures, dates, names of my relatives who were murdered—I had absolutely no clue what the experience was like, and never would.

GF: Even though representation is ultimately beyond experience, can we somehow convey some of the emotional weight of experience through art?

AW: We can try, but it's up to the viewer to decode it. Some people are more aware, more interested, feel things more deeply than others. I see this as an extremely personal matter—I'm not sure that any single piece of art (or anything for that matter) has a universally-accepted meaning—definitions are based on each individual's perspective, cognitive ability, emotional intellect.

GF: Do you intend to show your "Cycles of Violence" on the tenth anniversary of 9/11?

AW: A decade provides a bit of distance from the events of the day, and is certainly a time for reflection. I'll be showing Cycles of Violence in two shows this September—a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary 9/11 memorial show at the Freyberger Gallery, Penn State Berks and at a



show at the Dershowitz Gallery at Industry City Brooklyn exploring artists' reaction to terrorism.

GF: Can you tell me about your most recent projects?

AW: I've been spending a lot of time on Bible AdInfinitum©, a series that uses advertising decollage to unearth a new vision of the Old Testament. I have over 30 images, starting with The Creation of Man through to Joshua, King David and Samson and Delilah.

- 5 Ahron Weiner interviewed by Geraldine Fasentieux, New York City, August 2011.
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